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English language teacher educators' 'real world' approaches to professional learning

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Abstract

One of the most challenging and enlightening things in academia and daily life in general is one's exploration of him/her 'self' through ongoing transformative reflection. This narrative inquiry into the professional lives of 11 teacher educators in different contexts around the world displays their real world approaches (beliefs and practices) to professional learning within the Deweyan view of experience from an interpretive perspective, for there is little research on teacher educators' professional development apart from some studies (Koster & Dengerink, 2001; Lunenberg, 2002).

Keywords: Professionalism, teacher educators, ELT, SLTE, narrative inquiry, the Deweyan view of experience.

1. Introduction

Whereas there is a wealth of information as to how teachers, either novice, beginner or more experienced, develop professionally (Smith, 2003), as stated in the editorial of 2010 special issue of *Professional Development in Education* on teacher educators (Swennen & Bates, 2010),'teachers of teachers' had received little attention in the literature up to that issue. Therefore, my purpose is to contribute to this neglected area that needs more studies conducted into the professional lives of teacher educators. At the heart of my research interest is the issue of professionalism, and it is important at this stage to discuss it to contextualise my inquiry.

Defining a "professional" as "a trained and qualified specialist who displays a high standard of competent conduct in their practice", Leung (2009: 49) draws attention the constitutive sense of professionalism and refers to practitioners' knowledge, skills, and conduct. Furthermore, professionalism has been associated with having a strong technical culture (knowledge base); service ethic (commitment to serving clients' needs); professional commitment (strong individual and collective identities); and professional autonomy (control over classroom practice) (Etzioni 1969, Larson 1977, Talbert & McLaughlin 1996 in Day 2002: 681). The definitions also imply an ethical dimension and an element of the service of professionalism, which matters to the well-being of society. Nevertheless, the degree and quality of such criteria in real life may be understood from subjective interpretations of changing teacher education. If effective change is really sought after, then this change should come from teachers' and teacher educators' free will rather than their acceptance (Fullan, 1991: 117). This makes us interrogate the discretionary judgement of professionals beyond being a technician. Another argument about carrying out

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'missions' in the self-interested pursuit of status and resources (i.e. professionalisation) as well as broader ideals like commitment to quality of service (i.e. professionalism) reminds us of the moral nature of teaching, which is simply taken for granted in the literature (Fenstermacher, 1990: 132) despite its being a complementary force to intellectual depth (Fullan, 2003).

2. The underpinnings of the study and the research methodology

The study adopts the subjective reality as its ontology, personal knowledge as its social constructionist (Crotty, 1998) epistemology under its interpretivistic theoretical perspective and narrative inquiry as its methodology covering a life history research design that utilises a semi-structured interview as the qualitative method. The Deweyan theory of experience as the point of departure in my narrative inquiry is "a notation of inexpressible" though it is different from Kant's beyond-the-reach precognitive and precultural grounding of "thing-in-itself" (Dewey, 1981b: 175 in Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Its inexpressibility comes from the temporality of knowledge generation which is characterised by a changing stream through continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social and material environment. Adopting a Deweyan theory of experience, Johnson and Golombek (2011: 488) have also displayed how narrative as a meditational tool ignites cognitive processes by means of its three interconnected functions- *externalisation, verbalisation and systemic examination.*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teacher educators for the data collection. During the interviews, subsequent to some questions about their background information such as their years of experience followed items about their understanding of the features of professionalism, their beliefs, practices and philosophical values. Later on, their opinions concerning a sample anecdote about reflective moments of a teacher educator were asked to prompt their narration. In this way, the challenges and opportunities they come across have been revealed; lastly, metaphors as 'informative objects of analysis' (Sfard, 2008: 30) were used to provide the educators' views of 'self' and implicit interpretations of their valuation of professional learning.

Life story interview with a multifaceted role provides a life-as-a-whole personal narrative as a process and a product that arises from experience (Atkinson, 2007). In this sense, "narrative learning is not solely learning *from the narrative* but also learning that goes on *in the act of narration* and in the ongoing construction of a life story" (Goodson, Biesta et al., 2010: 127) . Therefore, "life history" is not only the exploration of personal, social, temporal and contextual influences that facilitate understanding of lives and phenomena but also an expression of elements of a researcher's life history within the conceptualisation, representation and eventual communication of new understandings (Cole and Knowles, 2001: 10).

The research questions were an indication of priori categories such as having a strong knowledge base; service ethic; professional autonomy; a sense of moral purpose and professional identities in a flux of change. The central question is: *"How do ELT Educators approach to professional learning and the defining features of professionalism?"* Participants were 11 English language teacher educators (with pseudonyms) working in various contexts including the UK and the EU (Lauren, Paul, Jason), Korea (Martin, Derek), The Gulf Area (Saudi Arabia-Hassan, Layla; Kuwait- Mahmoud) and Turkey (Sarp, Metin, Ceren). The research project required a signed copy of an internal ethical consent form from the Graduate School of Education, and all data were gathered by considering the ethical issues including "informed participant consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality and anonymity" (Trochim, 2001: 24). I tried to use 'a strategic and technical detachment approach' (Holliday, 2001: 178) for the content of analysis of the semi-structured interview, as I am familiar with most of the teacher educators. Respondent validation was applied to check the data sources after the constant comparison of the emerging patterns.

3. Teacher educators' beliefs and practices

3.1 Having a strong knowledge base

My argument for this category is in line with Korthagen's (2001: 24) realistic teacher education pedagogy that emphasizes pronesis (practical wisdom) instead of episteme (scientific knowledge). In line with this division, Paul has exemplified what he gained from practice, subsequent to his training period in the UK: "The strongest thing that experience gives is that great flexibility and confidence to divert and not to follow what I was taught to do when I

was being trained." He puts forward the gap between theory and practice quite realistically, and in the Turkish context, Metin has also gained a more real world approach to the teaching practice and theory in terms of applicability and added: "By experience, you are getting away from idealism and know multiplying two by two doesn't give four. It gives you the flexibility in your evaluations."

I have realised that one-way technical-rationality model in teacher education does not reflect the real approaches of teacher educators in any of the contexts. Rather, their stories reflect the particularity of the teaching situation as Schön (1983: 42) argues that teachers work in "swampy lowland where situations are confusing messes incapable of technical solution" rather than academic high grounds. For example, Lauren in the UK has gained many insights in the swamps while teaching international students in the context of an MA TEFL programme. Concerning the gap between the theory and practice real contexts, she illustrated the conflict her trainees experienced: "You actually see that they are not really putting ideas into practice; they are actually using their own initial framework... or the other way as the biggest problem or mismatch in teaching practice: they assume that something is right for any context, so like CLT. Students go from one extreme to the other." The other examples she has given such as composing groups including native and non-native speakers according to linguistic levels, matching multiple variables like cultural expectations, dealing with very little interaction among Saudi male and female groups, being with sensitive to that cultural differences are all related to practical wisdom or the idea of the pronesis, which reminds us of the importance of realistic teacher education programmes with an emphasis on school practicum.

3.2 Commitment to the service ethic

Krishnaveni and Anitha (2007) assert that commitment is one of the professional qualities of teacher educators as the reflection of the concern for others in addition to skill and concern for self, and it is related to personal and professional investment in a specific workplace and its goals as indicated by extra effort and attitude. European or UK-based teacher educators (TEs) expressed their commitment to their profession passionately. Derek has shown how he sees teaching as his lifestyle and added: "Every year as I teach, I say wow that was the best semester ever. I say this every year. I never think I'm great, but I do like to think that I'm the hardest worker. Some think that it is a job, leave it there. I can do it but why would I? I love teaching." Jason also draws attention to how service ethic is important in addition to the professionalization through qualifications: "I don't think necessarily you learn professionalism. I kind of had a professional mantra at the beginning of my profession, which would maybe be the same for me right now and I still want to give better to my students, and I still want to improve my own, so by that token I think I was always a professional, but I needed to grow my knowledge and skills better for my expertise, but I don't think maybe you're any less professional because you're inexpert." Lauren has made a connection between her profession and childhood memories as the only educator who expresses such a strong bond: "The first day I went to school as a 5 year-old, I thought "This is fantastic and I want to teach", and the first time I have taught, I said 'Yes, this is for me. I love it!'"

The educators from the Gulf Area have mostly seemed to express some lack of hope in terms of the professional ethic in their countries due to strict situations. Layla mentions a context challenging her commitment: "I want everything that I have done to be perfect. However, we have a very limited time for professional development under the obligations of curriculum and evaluation in English departments." Mahmoud and Sarp see professional learning as an extra thing which you challenge to do and dedicate all your time for, while Ceren wishes it to be like nature within which no conflicts exist, knowing that it is full of conflicts in her workplace. Different degrees of commitment of TEs in different countries can be understood better by analysing their workplace contexts which reveals the degree of autonomy or discretionary judgment they have.

3.3 Professional autonomy (personal and institutional concerns)

TEs without passion about their professions have turned out to be working in contexts with a limited sense of agency and freedom to behave professionally under the strict managerial and top-down directions as I understood from the metaphors they think about a professional life such

as *a hawk* (Hassan) or *stars in the sky* (Layla) representing hard-to-reach celestial or natural beings. Hassan from Saudi Arabia makes his concern about the lack of autonomy explicit: "Being a middle manager is like being between two layers, squeezed between top management and teaching staff. You try to implement the 'orders', and you minimize that gap between top management and the staff who doesn't know what's going on behind the scenes." Kuwaiti Mahmoud exposes his managerial department full of forcing implementations under the controlled top-down approach of the ministry of education: **"**We don't have a teaching philosophy in my case we are not allowed to be creative or to have our own philosophy. If they ask you to teach CLT or another method, you have to cover all the content of the textbook in this way. If you are obliged to be committed, without any honesty you do your job you are not satisfied with."

Except for Lauren saying that "In academic level I love having the luxury of setting the curriculum, writing the course assessment criteria", all TEs gave examples of the conflicts between their personal and institutional aims. As a trainer working in Turkey for years before coming to the UK, Paul narrates the institutional atmosphere in his previous job: "The institution tried to provide everything for the teachers, so the teachers just had to turn up and deliver the goods, and I think that was very alienating, so they didn't feel the need for professional development anymore." One of the most striking examples about the restricting power of hierarchical relations in departments has come from Martin in South Korea. As long as there is not a problem, the chairman may seem invisible to him, which gives the freedom to behave flexible within the classroom though the structure of control reminds him of *a terminator or a machine,* very mechanical and almost robotic, to be put on and taken off at the end of each working day as an indicator of a simplistic and mechanistic way of controlled professional life. As data above suggest, all these different contexts implying the existence of a control mechanism or the lack of agency are the evidence of managerial professionalism that sees teachers as service providers or merely state employees rather than professionals with autonomy to determine the nature of their work as in democratic one (Sachs, 2001).

3.4 A sense of moral purpose

The reasons teacher educators stated to develop professionally are a sign of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations naturally existing together as part of the sense of moral purpose (Sober and Wilson, 1998: 308 in Fullan, 2003), whereas TEs have suggested such pluralism as presenting them in an either-or style as Derek and Jason suggest: "Commitment can be learnt, you can realise the value of that but altruism can't be learnt. You are in it for the money and the professionalism and the fame and the glory, or you are in it for the students." Hassan has mentioned a temporary kind of wish to teach or not to teach as he probably sees his job as a top-down array of actions to be implemented, but in conflict with his current institutional performance, he has a deep spiritual or religious bond to the profession as well: "The most honourable rewarding profession is teaching as it is the profession of the first teacher, the Prophet Mohammed (s.a.w.); we take it from that perspective, so profound." Some of them have less emotional and more cognitive approach to the sense of moral purpose or the reverse. Yet, each TE is committed to betterment to an extent, and if we accept TEs as leaders and change agents in society and education, as Fullan (2001: 13) asserts, every leader must have and work on improving his or her moral purpose as it is about both ends and means. However, he warns us that no matter how passionate we are about improving life, it may be to a fault without "an understanding of the change process, strong relationships, knowledge building and coherence making", and these components are all related to how professional identities of professionals develop in our era, the topic coming next.

3.5 Shaping the professional self and knowing oneself

The longitudinal relationship between professional learning and developments in professional identities is beyond the scope of this paper; however, I could interpret the metaphors and teaching philosophies TEs have suggested as an indication of their sense of self and views of change process as Holland *et al.* (1998 in McKeon & Harrison, 2010: 27) also stress the relationship between identity and personal history. To exemplify, *an organic metaphor of a garden* (which Derek took on from David Nunan) representing the more you learn and develop the bigger the garden grows; a living organism like *a caddisfly or a butterfly* with non-stop evolving stages at the heart of one DNA, which is all the way there and which is this kind of commitment, altruism or the professional credo (Jason) are signs of lifelong learning in a flux of change, a sense of moral purpose and personal vision within the professional learning. Lauren's metaphor, *an abstract photo or painting about impressionism* through which you actually see different things, layers and aspects depending on how close you are to that impressionistic painting, is also earth-shatteringly expressive in terms of the complexity of subjectivities and the importance of openness to different interpretations rather than mere 'black and white' certainties in the change process. If you stand back from it, you actually see the whole and what you think is reality, but when you get close to it, it's completely different again and you can see all the bits. Lastly, Paul, in the struggle to adapt to the roles as a researcher and an academic in an applied area, feels like kind of *caught in the middle* because what he spends his time doing is research but a lot of what he is doing with his students is not really about research but teaching. The most experienced TE among them, Lauren, seems to have explored the rule of life, change, and seeing the real word from an inclusive perspective encompassing all the possibilities, opportunities and challenges with a huge expertise in the field.

In conclusion, by better knowing yourself, you are more likely to know how to help others (Loughran, 2006: 18). This is a big question like "to be or not to be"... Even if it is not the reason of existence, it is the process of giving meaning to "who I am and who I want to become and what difference I am trying to do personally to the world". This is also the starting point of building personal vision that brings the other chains of actions like inquiry, mastery of skills, collaboration with others into play in the journey to face change and challenge proactively (Fullan, 1993: 45). This narrative inquiry into teacher educators' lives has not only resulted in a product, which is this interpretive study, hopefully contributing to the SLTE world from a 'teacher educator life story' perspective, but also opened new doors for me on the way of shaping my professional self and thereby knowing myself. All in all, the point is to be awakened, aware of things that we take for granted or that are awaiting to be discovered or in a more interactionist perspective to be emerged.

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